

Uncertainty management strategies in the process of identity formation of Polish young adults

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Introduction

The Polish politics and economy between 2007 and 2015 were shaped by political groups with centre- and socio-liberal tendencies as well as a Christian-democratic core. The party that held power at that time, the *Civic Platform* (PO, Platforma Obywatelska) was hardly interested in ideological activity (Koleczyński, 2008; Kowalczyk, 2011; Polska Times, 2011). The main issues emphasised in PO's political programme were the economy and the continuation of projects aimed at deepening the integration with the European Union (EU). The vast majority of the supporters of PO and the PO-PSL coalition (PSL, Polish People's Party) originated from large and medium-sized cities, less often from towns and villages, and they had considerable income and higher education (Kowalczyk, 2014; Newsweek Polska, 2015; parlament2015.pkw.gov.pl.). Eight years of PO-PSL's governance resulted in changes in the Polish economy (i.e. liberalising the market and reducing the supervisory role of the state towards economic processes), which on the one hand were expected by a part of the society – especially the wealthier one – but on the other hand, they also led to progressive deprivation of groups already economically disadvantaged. This was reflected, among other things, in growing migration of young people seeking employment in other EU countries. Interestingly, the Polish economy, loosely linked to Western economies, did not feel the shock caused by the economic and financial crisis of 2008 to such an extent. Relatively good ratings of the Polish economy on the international market and its positive evaluation by international rating agencies did not translate into the perceived financial and social security of all citizens (OECD Economic Surveys: Poland, 2014; Polish CSO – Central Statistical Office, 2015). The deepening social stratification seemed to remain unnoticed for the ruling coalition led by the PO. The above was in contrast to the views of the opposition party, *Law and Justice* (PiS, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), which, in its programme and election campaigns in 2015, clearly stressed their intent to fight poverty and social inequality as well as direct greater attention towards young people and their better future on the domestic labour market. Stopping the outflow of the young labour force has become one of the priorities of the PiS, which in 2015, in the course of

democratic elections, finally took over power in Poland. According to analysts, it was precisely the postulates addressed to young people, containing specific solutions regarding the labour market, which were an attractive argument for young voters.

Young adults and the market

In 2013, in the entire EU community, nearly 21% of young people aged 25–29 were outside the labour market, not continuing any form of education or apprenticeship. Moreover, young people were often exposed to lack of jobs or limited access to jobs, not only because of their lack of experience. This tendency became more pronounced after 2008 and was characteristic of the vast majority of EU member states (EUROSTAT, 2015, p. 11). It is also worrying that young people experiencing long-term unemployment, which is not a rare phenomenon in this cohort, lose the opportunity to actively participate in society, not only economically, but also culturally and socio-psychologically.

In the case of Poland, statistical data from 2013 regarding employment of young people, considered in the context of the total workforce (28 million people aged 15–74) and the total number of economically active people (16 million), are as follows: among people between the ages of 20 and 24, 40% of them were learners only, 11% combined learning with work and 29% were only working. For the EU, these figures were respectively: 32% for learners only, 18% for those combining learning with work and 30% for those only working (Eurostat, 2015, p. 140). This comparison shows that in Poland, young people aged 20–24 more often chose (in 2013) not to combine their educational and professional paths. Several factors may stand behind this; *inter alia*: the traditional way of upbringing, but also the market with its limited labour supply. Traces of this tendency can be found in the answers given by the respondents in the research that I have carried out.

The problem of young people being outside the labour market is not unique to the Polish economy. Unfortunately, this unfavourable phenomenon is also strongly present in other EU and European countries in general. European youth aged 15–24 are, on average, twice as often devoid of job opportunities in comparison to the so-called mature adults, as evidenced by statistical data for the EU area – if, for the total population of people able to work, 7.3% were unemployed, in the case of youth in 2016 it was as many as 18.7%. For Poland, the total unemployment rate was then around 4.5% (the same as in the Netherlands), and in the cohort of young people – 17.7%. For comparison, in the previously mentioned countries such as Greece, Spain, Italy and France, these numbers were much higher, reflecting a critical state of affairs: 21% and 47%, 16% and 44%, 11% and 38%, 9.2% and 25%, respectively (EUROSTAT, 2017).

The high unemployment rate among young people, which is a result of inadequate supply of jobs, correlated with the highly competitive market, is a set of factors influencing the decisions of young adults on the issue of trying to get more and more education in the hope that this will increase their chances on the

labour market. Besides, it is not uncommon that taking an additional field of study, another professional course or extending one's studies is seen as a way of deferring the moment of entering adulthood. This moment, as the experience of the last decade, may prove to be an unpleasant rite of passage, often fraught with disappointment and frustration as youthful dreams or ideals are lost in everyday reality (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 2002; Majerek, 2012; Hryniewicz, 2014).

Junk contracts and precariat

The economic crisis of 2008 resulted in the emergence of specific system solutions, among which there were forms of short-term (up to three months) employment, primarily allowing employers to significantly reduce labour costs. The so-called junk contracts have become a popular form of employment in the economies most affected by financial turbulence of the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Less than a decade later, in 2016, the highest percentage of people employed in this way, forming the European precariat, was present in Croatia (8.6% men and 8.2% women), France (5.2% and 4.4%, respectively), Spain (4.5% and 4.8%), Poland (4.8% and 4.2%), Finland (3.9% and 4.8%) and Slovenia (4.2% and 4.9%); and for the entire EU, 2.2% for both sexes (EUROSTAT, 2017).

It is worth noting that for a country outside the EU structures, Iceland, characterised by a high HDI ratio, many people were employed under such contracts: 4.1% men and 4.2% women. In the case of economies that were the first to experience the effects of the 2008 crisis, the so-called PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Greece and Spain), only Iceland and Ireland managed to overcome financial difficulties relatively quickly. The other four are still struggling with problems that are a direct repercussion of the economic shock of the end of the first decade of the 21st century (Comston, 2017). In this context, the Portuguese precariat is made up of 3.3% of the overall number of working men and 3.1% of working women; in Italy, the numbers are, respectively, 3.2% and 3.1%; in Greece – 1.8% and 1.4%; and Ireland, 0.6% and 0.8% (EUROSTAT, 2017).

Only a cursory look at the above numbers allows seeing a certain characteristic feature, correlated with the economic and cultural conditions of these countries. In five of them – Spain, Finland, Slovenia, Ireland and Iceland – women are more present in precariat; while in Croatia, France, Poland, Portugal, Italy and Greece, these are men. For the analysed case of Polish young adults, the masculine face of the precariat will be of significant importance (for more about junk contracts in Poland, see Mrozowicki, Krasowska and Karolak, 2015).

Uncertainty, insecurity and ambivalence

Uncertainty, as well as endangered economic, psychological and physical security (bearing in mind terrorist attacks happening since 2001), are the hallmarks of the post-modern and post-industrial era. The transition from industry-oriented production to service production was intended to bring to Western countries more

favourable solutions in the economic and social spheres, resulting in rapid development and progress against their eastern rivals. This transformation, progressing in waves, resulted in accelerated information exchange, multiplication of communication channels and new forms of communication, using the achievements of modern technologies (Toffler, 1980; Castells, 2009; Lang and Lang, 2009; Vinge, 2013). Acceleration of the pace of development forced in turn the modification of forms of work, which resulted in the change of lifestyles both in their individual and collective dimensions. One of the characteristic features of the above was, as Toffler states in *The Third Wave*, the need for faster knowledge acquisition and the acquisition of competences that meet the requirements of highly competitive markets, including the global market. The acceleration of the pace of change has resulted in and continues to require ongoing replenishment – or even replacement – of the knowledge already acquired with new knowledge – hence, for instance, educational programmes marked with the acronym LLL (Life Long Learning). The necessity of constant learning, ‘being up to date’ with the latest tendencies and market trends, may be on one hand an inspiring challenge, maintaining the mental and physical fitness of the individual; but on the other, a source of stress, frustration, tension and even suffering – especially existential suffering (Bauman, 2000; Halcli, 2000; Giddens, 2002; Paul, Vastamäki and Moser, 2016). Keeping up with the high pace of life requires constant mobilisation and activity of both the individual and the community. To achieve and maintain this state, extraordinary measures are needed to ensure the adequate potential – i.e. natural, human/personal, infrastructural (including technological) and systemic resources (power and management). Accelerated use of these resources, frequently ignoring the consequences, often leads to destabilisation and loss of balance in many dimensions: economic (economic and financial crises), social (protests, unrest, riots, revolts), ecological (contamination of the natural environment: drinking water, air, soil) or health-related (diseases of civilisation, including obesity, diabetes, cancer, alcoholism, etc.) (Radandt, Rantanen and Renn, 2008; Wittchen et al., 2011; Hryniewicz, 2014). The risk of the appearance of these negative phenomena is high, and reality provides sufficient evidence that they have become an immanent element of modernity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 2002; Hier, 2003; Bischoff, 2008).

The world divided

Highly developed societies of the beginning of the 21st century have made their functioning dependent on high technologies, including the Internet. The digitisation of individual and community life has become so obvious that for young generations it is an immanent feature/disposition without which efficient functioning is impossible. This also applies to the majority of adults (source: *Internet access in the EU*). It should be noted, however, that access to high-speed Internet connections must be correlated with access to adequately functional devices that one must be able to use. And it’s not just about a computer, a laptop or an iPad, but

above all, mobile devices like smartphones, which are almost a 24-hour companion for a young person (often a child, definitely a teenager and young adult). In the European Union in 2014, 9 young people out of 10, aged 16–29, use network resources on a daily basis. For Polish teenagers aged between 12 and 15, the rate was 95.4% (Statistics Poland, 2016). It is significant that the higher the formal education, the more frequent use of the so-called ‘net’. (EUROSTAT, 2015, p. 12). The availability of devices and connections that allow the use of electronic resources, however, is not the same for everyone. The so-called phenomenon of digital exclusion, associated in the first place with older people, also affects children and young people living in less developed regions of Poland, mainly the areas along the eastern border. For them, the first barrier to overcome in personal and later professional development is the barrier of access to information, which is now increasingly taking the form of electronic information. The attributes of this state of affairs are partially reflected in the responses from the questionnaires.

Self-identification and identity in crisis

The opportunities provided by the Internet and the use of resources available in electronic form improve individual and collective life. Unfortunately, the Internet can also carry a whole set of threats, among others of a psychological nature, also affecting the processes of individual formation as well as community self-identification. Identity or self-identification as phenomena which are in constant ‘becoming’ are subject to multiple factors having a source both in the individual (the actor) themselves and in the environment in which the individual (actor) acts or appears. An important role in this process is also played by the context of a specific moment of the subject’s presence (Bauman, 2001; Brukaker, 2002; Castells, 2004; Szwed, 2007). The process of constructing identity is necessarily an activity divided over time, absorbing above all the psychological forces of the individual or community, often requiring also physical involvement (the case of, *inter alia*, migrants, displaced persons, refugees, people subject to gender reassignment, etc.). Becoming is a permanent element of this process, often occurring in a way which is imperceptible for the subject. It happens, however, that some phases, or stages of this process, may be felt by a subject – individual or collective – particularly painfully as changing/destabilising the current state. The loss of balance or harmony, described in the scientific discourse of the last few decades very thoroughly (Erikson, 1970; Marcia, 1980; Giddens, 1991; Jawłowska, 2001; O’Brien, 2001; Vandenberghe, 2014), gave this phenomenon the name of the crisis, adding a negative value to the notion. This is to some extent right, if the state of destabilisation persists for a long time, but in the case of a short-term loss of stability, this condition does not necessarily mean something negative. According to Reinhart Koselleck, the widespread use of the term *crisis* separates it from its original meaning referring to ‘disputing’, ‘facing something’, ‘testing one’s strength’ or ‘fighting’ (Koselleck, 2009, p. 22). Returning to this primary meaning, crisis in the case of an individual or collective identity would mean negotiating

one's own image or own place in social reality, both with oneself and others. This particular 'dispute' or 'confrontation' has its perceptible costs of psychological nature, often physical, economic and, above all, cultural, designing the shape of future societies in an individual and collective dimension.

Empirical study of Polish young adults

The research which is the subject of this chapter was aimed at providing approximate preliminary data regarding the way of feeling and identifying the level of uncertainty that may accompany young adults on a daily basis (students studying at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków – one of the three universities located in the city).¹ In addition, it was important to obtain feedback on how students deal with uncertainty, whether they have some uncertainty management strategies such as reducing the level of the phenomenon, and whether the experienced degree of uncertainty affects their self-identification and the perception (categorization) of these individuals by external observers.

Two hundred and thirty students of the Institute of Intercultural Studies at the Faculty of International and Political Studies took part in the research carried out in November and December 2017. Students were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire consisting of 19 extensive questions (during classes, most often at the end of a class). From among the paper-based questionnaires, the feedback information suitable for scientific analysis was returned in 198 cases. The remaining answers did not meet the requirements of high-reliability information – the reason was the failure to complete a significant part of the survey, leaving questions unanswered, giving a contradictory answer, or providing answers indicating that the questionnaire was completed in an automatic way. For these reasons, 32 questionnaires were excluded from the analysis.

The answers obtained from the properly filled questionnaires allow construction of the following assumptions, leading to the formulation of several basic hypotheses:

- H1. It is doubtful that the individuals, subject to the study, had strategies to deal with uncertainty or strategies to reduce uncertainty level; rather, these are spontaneous actions, reacting to the 'here and now', not involving a longer time perspective.
- H2. Sources of obtaining information aimed at reducing the degree of uncertainty remain traditional: it is the immediate environment of the respondent in the sense of importance (a person for some reason important to the respondent); very rarely the source in this case is an institution, an administrative body, more often it is an environmental interview and gathering information to analyse further.
- H3. There is a moderate correlation between the perceived degree of uncertainty and self-identification, and to a lesser extent, the identification of the individual by their external environment.

The hypotheses result from interpretation of the responses characterised as follows.

Among 198 completed questionnaires, 26 were filled by men. This is a reflection of the sex proportions of students studying at the Institute of Intercultural Studies.² Both fields of study, 'intercultural relations' and 'cultural studies in international perspective', are highly feminised.

Among the male respondents, the reason for taking up studies was primarily the desire to expand their competences, develop further and also to gain (literally) a well-paid job. In two cases, it was added that taking up studies was an alternative choice – without elaborating on the issue. Male respondents came mostly from southern Poland, from medium and large cities, in contrast to female respondents coming from small or large towns, with smaller towns under 25,000 residents dominating.

Twelve men presented themselves as a self-confident person who has a clear vision of what he wants to do. Ten, in turn, indicated a moderate degree of self-confidence – they placed themselves at three on the scale, that is, half way between 'strong self-confidence' and 'self-confidence' and 'lack' self-confidence and 'a strong lack of self-confidence'.

Four respondents saw the everyday element of uncertainty as *destabilising* their normal acting, that is, de facto strongly hindering their harmonious (societal) functioning. In a group of 26 people, this is not a high number, but it should be noted. The vast majority of men do not feel that uncertainty about the future disturbs their functioning, or feel that it does only to a certain moderate degree (20 responses). Two respondents did not answer this question.

In the case of a question about *discomfort* in the face of uncertainty as to their immediate future, the answers were evenly distributed: eight for each category: strongly, moderately, not very much. Two people did not answer this question.

Regarding the strategies of dealing with uncertainty about the future, the answers indicating the choice of one option dominated, i.e. consulting the issue with the closest surroundings (people considered important by the respondents). Interestingly, despite the possibility of choosing several answers in this question, the majority chose one answer only.

The next largest group were men who based their strategy on the issue in question in an attempt to recognise the situation and consult with other people (important for them). Two people pointed to the replication of proven solutions as a way to reduce uncertainty; the same number considered giving up the decision to the so-called fate, and four admitted that they do not apply any strategy.

Regarding the impact of uncertainty of the future on self-identification, the majority of male respondents (12 people) answered that this happens only to a small extent. Slightly fewer people (8) stated that uncertainty affects the construction of their self-identification to a significant or definitely significant degree. The smallest group (4 people) did not state that uncertainty affected their self-identification.

The issue of the impact of uncertainty on how the external environment perceives the respondent is slightly different. It turns out that 6 people described this relationship as very strong, 12 as weak but still occurring, and for 6 it did not occur at all. One respondent did not answer this question.

In cases requiring consultation or advice, the respondents first indicated the closest friends, then colleagues, followed by the parents or parent, then those whom they casually met. Interestingly, it was not uncommon to share doubts and concerns about the future with casual people online – 14 respondents chose such an answer.

These were the answers given by male students, young men studying in the field of humanities and social sciences, as both ‘cultural studies in international perspective’ and ‘intercultural relations’ have such a character.

As far as female respondents are concerned, the information received from them, in several respects, slightly differs from the aforementioned cohort.

The reason for taking up studies in the case of female students was similar to the answers obtained from males, that is, the desire to broaden their knowledge, to acquire higher education, to satisfy their own ambitions and those of the immediate environment (family). It should be noted, however, that no respondent indicated the financial reason for taking up studies – a well-paid future job. Perhaps this argument is also important for young women, but it has not been explicitly articulated.

The vast majority of the respondents defined themselves as a self-confident person with clearly defined goals (88 people). A moderate degree of self-confidence and clarity of plans was demonstrated by 64 female students. Twenty women saw themselves as insecure and devoid of clearly defined goals for the future. The distribution of these answers correlated with another criterion – a place of origin (small, medium, large city/town) of individual respondents allows to put forward a hypothesis (which may be possible to verify by in-depth individual interviews, IDIs) that people originating from small towns or rural areas show a greater degree of determination in constructing their own broadly understood (not only in the professional sense) career.

The uncertainty of tomorrow as an element which is *destabilising* and strongly or very strongly hindering their normal functioning was indicated by 40 female students, almost two times fewer than respondents who do not seem to mind uncertainty (98 responses). The least numerous group were people perceiving the uncertainty of tomorrow as an element affecting their functioning to an average degree (32 responses). Perhaps ‘taming’ uncertainty is one of the methods (strategies?) of functioning in the modern world. Young adults, probably, have become accustomed to this permanent state and treat uncertainty as a permanent element of their world. This assumption can be verified by in-depth interviews.³

Uncertainty as causing *discomfort* to normal functioning was declared by 36 respondents; 54 women indicated a moderate state of discomfort due to the uncertainty of tomorrow, while the majority, 81 students, answered that they felt only a slight degree of discomfort or hardly any.

The strategy of dealing with uncertainty in the vast majority of responses indicates the combination of ways of reducing the element of lack of proper information. The most frequently mentioned were, at the same time, consulting with people important to the respondents, and coming to grips with the situation by collecting data. There were also answers indicating the use of solutions previously tested by other people. No strategy was applied by 28 students, while the next six stated that the issue was not important to them and they left things to fate. It can therefore be concluded that for a relatively large group of young female students at this stage of life, planning, anticipating and undertaking the effort to develop solutions that reduce the risk of failure, are absent. It is difficult to determine to what degree these youthful attitudes will take the form of behavioural habits in the mature life of an individual.

As regards the issue – subjectively perceived – of the influence of uncertainty on their self-identification in the face of tomorrow, most respondents saw only a small degree of such influence. The vast majority indicated that uncertainty affects their self-identification to a small degree; for 28 people, it did not do so at all; for 44 female students, this relationship was significant (a significant degree of dependence) and for 6 respondents, it determined their self-identification (the uncertainty about tomorrow strongly affected their self-identification).

According to 74 young students, uncertainty of the future, to at least a small extent, affected their identification by the external environment. For 32 respondents, this happened to a significant or strong degree, while for 64 this dependency did not exist.

When it came to consulting someone or seeking advice in the case of anxiety and/or doubts about the future, female students most often indicated the parent or parents and a friend, and in the next sequence colleagues or acquaintances. People who were met in real life were not a very popular choice, and online connections were even less popular. Only 16 answers mentioned consulting a psychologist as the first instance.

Conclusion and further research

The results presented in this chapter lead to the conclusion that young adults, full-time students of humanities and social sciences, seem to have no special strategy of dealing with the uncertainty of the future. Research carried out on a relatively small group of respondents, 198 individuals, may provide only an illustrative picture of the state of affairs – whether or not the uncertainty management strategy is in place. It follows in this case that the majority of young adults do not have such a strategy at all. However, another interpretation is possible that the strategy is the lack of one, since the late modernity is undergoing transformations that are ever faster and sometimes even difficult to keep up with. Developing a strategy that quickly turns out to be out of date in the context of Bauman's 'liquid modernity' or Vinge's 'singularity' may therefore seem like a pointless activity. This strategy could be defined by the Polish saying 'things will go somehow'.

Three hypotheses proposed in the paper and verified in the light of the data obtained through the questionnaire allow to conclude the following:

- a Hypothesis 1 (H1) proposes that young adults, subject to the study, have neither strategies to cope with uncertainty nor strategies to reduce uncertainty level. Rather, the students prefer to produce spontaneous solutions by reacting to the 'here and now', which excludes a long-time perspective applied to management of their future lives and future careers.
- b In the light of hypothesis 2 (H2), sources of information to reduce the degree of uncertainty remain traditional. Information is obtained from the immediate environment of the respondent, in most cases a person or persons most immediate, i.e. parent or parents, friends, colleagues, peers. This source is further complemented by environmental interviews and information obtained from other non-institutional sources. Very seldom would the information to reduce the degree of uncertainty be looked for in an institution or an administrative body. This suggests very limited trust to official entities or even lack of trust which in itself may require separate research and more thorough investigation.
- c Hypothesis 3 (H3) claims there is a moderate correlation between uncertainty and self-identification of the respondents. The majority of young adults indicated that subjectively perceived uncertainty did influence their lives, although to a small but still noticeable degree. For 44 female students this relationship was significant and for six individuals uncertainty determined strongly their self-identification. As regards external environment and its identification of the individuals in question, uncertainty played a much smaller role.

The outcomes of the research raise a set of further, more detailed questions concerning *inter alia* the profound reasons of such a state of affairs. Advanced examination should therefore be based on the qualitative element; in other words, the research carried out in November and December 2017 should be continued and complemented by qualitative study, taking the form of in-depth interviews with individual students. The number of interviews to obtain the most reliable data should correspond to at least half of the number of collected surveys, and certainly should equal the number of the so-called saturation of the sample, i.e. the moment when subsequent answers do not bring anything new but merely repeat previously obtained information. This is the next stage of the project in progress, as it sheds more light on the real cause of the problem of uncertainty and its correlation with identity formation and identity cohesion of young adults or, while applying Jeffrey J. Arnett's terminology, emerging adults (Arnett, 2004, 2000).

Notes

- 1 The Jagiellonian University (www.uj.edu.pl) is the oldest university in Poland, founded in 1364. Nowadays around 40,000 students study here in 16 faculties.

- 2 The Institute offers two fields of study: intercultural relations (BA and MA programmes) and cultural studies in international perspective (BA).
- 3 The in-depth interviews were still in progress at the time of preparation of this text for publication.

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